

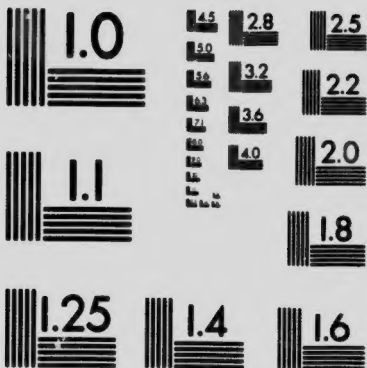
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An Old Case of Chronic Insomnia

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TORONTO.

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AN OLD CASE OF CHRONIC INSOMNIA.

BY WILLIAM RENWICK RIDDELL, LL. D., F. R. H. S.,
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An extraordinary character in the early history of Upper Canada was Robert (Fleming) Gou . . . Born in Scotland of a moderately wealthy family, he was educated in St. Andrews and Edinburgh Universities. He fell out with the Earl of Kellie at home and went to England, where he made a careful report for the Government on the condition of certain agricultural classes. He then became a farmer in Wiltshire, but fell out with his landlord, the Duke of Somerset, and came out to Canada in 1817. He soon fell out with the authorities in Upper Canada, and in 1819 he was banished from that Province. Then he went to England and bombarded the King, his Ministers, and the Parliament with petitions concerning his wrongs. Not receiving sufficient attention from Henry (afterward Lord) Brougham, he horsewhipped him in the lobby of the House of Commons, for which he was sent to prison until he should give security to keep the peace; this he refused to do for over three years. Getting tired of jail, he got out and shortly thereafter came to New York and later to Canada. He pestered the Parliament of Canada about his treatment and was granted a pardon and an annuity of two hundred dollars for life. He refused both and went again to Scotland, where he died at the age of eighty-five years.

His case presents more than one curious aspect medically, but I propose to speak at length only of one. Passing over the facts that he was almost insane when in jail at Niagara before his banishment, and that he, fearing for his reason on his return to England, threw himself on the parish and broke

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stones for a living for months, I shall speak only of his alleged insomnia.

The story I take wholly from his own writing. He tells us that this did not trouble him till 1833. When after horsewhipping Brougham he was imprisoned in the House of Correction at Cold Bath Fields, he had had very little need of sleep, and the greater part of the time spent in bed, never more than six hours, was given to reveries. He thinks that the habit of doing without sleep began to form at that time; after he left the prison and from March, 1828, till November, 1833, he was tortured with unsettled business affairs but was generally in perfect health. He could walk without fatigue from morning to night and four or five hours' sleep was quite enough for rest and enjoyment.

November 5, 1833, he left Edinburgh at 6 p. m. in a canal boat for Glasgow; the boat was an iron one, and jarring every little while against some other boat, bridge, or lock, kept him in unspeakable discomfort, and sleep was out of the question. The ship from Greenock to Liverpool ran into a hurricane and was at sea till the second day: these two nights were sleepless like the preceding one. Before going on board his ship for New York, he told the captain his condition, and was advised to take a warm bath before going to bed at Liverpool. He did so, and got some sleep; but all the way over, from November 9th to December 22nd he had not a wink of sleep. Laudanum, opium, getting tipsy, all were in vain; the "grog" indeed made him sick for the first time at sea, but he got no sleep. This spell of sleeplessness, it will be seen, was of more than six weeks duration.

The next attack came on at Willoughby, Ohio, in the beginning of January, 1837, when he was seized with erysipelas in the leg. Thereafter he was five months without sleep, then sleep returned gradually; for many weeks he dozed at times and had strange dreams.

About January, 1839, the insomnia again set in,

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induced by ill health and family affliction. After enduring it for seven months he consulted Doctor Widmer, of Toronto, "reputed the most experienced Physician in Upper Canada," and certainly well deserving his fame. He advised to dine early and go to bed fasting. This to the last, afforded the most comfort. He also prescribed acetate of morphine, which had not the slightest effect. The doctor supposed that the trouble proceeded from excitement, reading and writing in politics, but Gourlay thought this a mistake, his view being that it arose from unsettled private affairs.

After three years of this sleeplessness Gourlay consulted Doctor Robinson, of Montreal, who had a patient, Mr. Jamieson, who had not slept for five months; Doctor Robinson could do nothing.

In September, 1840, arriving in New York from St. Catharines after a long and wearisome voyage, he lay down on a luxurious bed, closed round with mosquito curtains, and he will not swear that he slept none. So, too, in June, 1841, seated in the door of his log house in Dereham Township in Upper Canada during the stillness of a summer evening, he verily believes he would have slept had not a neighbor disturbed him. Five months afterward, in Kingston, Upper Canada (November, 1841), he had a delightful night; he told his landlady he had nearly been asleep; and at Quebec a week afterward he "dozed and dreamt which is certainly an approach to sleep"; while about a year afterward, after being "entertained for a whole day in the most delightful manner" he flung himself into bed and "if Morpheus did not obtain dominion over" him, he "had at least perfect repose." Several times persons came into his room and reported that they had found him asleep, but this he denies; he "knew the train of" his "thoughts perfectly." He had "tried many remedies, a hop pillow, hop tea, etc., and laudanum, fifty drops, seventy drops, ninety drops, and upward of a hundred, yet still . . . no sleep." He had not as yet tried mesmerism. A month or so

afterward (June 16th), he obtained two hours' sleep, but no more for a month or more when we have the last account of the trouble.

At no subsequent date does Gourlay recur to this affliction. It is therefore to be presumed that he was quite cured of it.

This extraordinary story there can be no doubt Gourlay implicitly believed. He was, it is certain, incapable of misstating a fact, however wrong his inferences might be; but it is equally certain that he was in error. It is by no means an uncommon circumstance that one believes he has not slept a wink all night, when those occupying the same room, or perhaps the same bed with him, have been kept awake for an hour or more by his snoring. Every one must have had experiences of whole nights passed, as he thinks, in sleeplessness, when it has been made quite certain that he did in fact sleep. No medical man could be found who believed that Gourlay could pass years without sleep, even if he did nothing but rest; not to mention the fact of his being mentally - physically active during practically the whole period.

No doubt he was a light sleeper and did not require many hours of sleep. This seems a part of his general ill health. When he says that his "constitution, naturally strong and vigorous, was till forty years of age sustained by healthy exercise as a farmer, riding and walking much," this must be taken *cum grano salis*. In 1809, he was advised to move to England on account of his health "rendering a change of climate necessary." In the summer of 1815 he had to go to Cheltenham to take the waters there on account of ill health. On coming to Upper Canada, he was confined to the house for two months by sickness. All this was before the confinement in Niagara jail. Thereafter, his frequent attacks of erysipelas indicate an undermined constitution; but the most noticeable illness is of a "nervous" character. The rheumatism may perhaps be fairly accounted for by a wetting he got near

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Staines. Using his own words, he "suffered for years from a nervous disease." He "guarded against the usual consequences by means not one in a thousand would have resolution for." He "by no means acknowledged insanity," but it was necessary in order "to save his reason" (he was "on the verge of madness") that he should break stones on the road, a pauper where he had been a farmer, thereby curing himself of the nervous disease which "for three years tore him to pieces"; he determined at one time, when suffering from this "nervous" disease, to commit suicide at the Lan's End. After returning to Canada, we find him stricken again and again. On returning to Scotland he feared he never would see Canada again by reason of his state of health.

Yet he did marvels in the way of walking, till forty years of age. Walks of thirty or forty miles a day never distressed him. On his return to the old land, in 1819, we find him at once making walking tours in Scotland, later in England. On release from Cold Bath Fields he walked in Scotland from morning till night without fatigue, and when again in Canada we find him walking on every opportunity. No doubt this exercise, coupled with a constitution physically sound and a temperament from infancy sanguine and enthusiastic, enabled him to live to the great age he attained, notwithstanding the rude buffetings of the world, bitter disappointments, and grievous sorrow.